

The Duke's People

In the Memorial Hall in the little town of Richmond, Natal, hangs a portrait of the Duke of Buccleuch with the following inscription:

Walter Francis, Fifth Duke of Buccleuch, who sent out upwards of forty emigrants from his estate in 1850.

He purchased land, financed and made himself responsible for the emigrants.

The Duke owned vast estates in Britain and was regarded as the uncrowned King of Scotland. It was said that he could walk across that country on his own land. He also owned estates in England, the most famous being Beaulieu Abbey in Hampshire.

What prompted the nobleman to purchase land in Natal and make himself responsible for the emigrants? For he made an outstanding charity, expending the greatest care on the venture and a considerable amount of money.

On Beaulieu Abbey estate lies Buckler's Hard on the Beaulieu river and adjacent to the great New Forest oaks which were once turned into 'wooden walls of old England'. For this was once a famous ship-building yard, and three of Nelson's ships at Trafalgar were built at the slipways. But with the cessation of the wars with Napoleon and the advent of steam-driven ships, the industry fell away. Also, times were hard, unemployment high and people had no alternative but to emigrate.

When Natal came before the British public in 1849, it offered many advantages. Most of the Dutch farmers, rather than remain under British rule, had trekked over the Drakensberg mountains to join their fellow Boers in the Orange River Territory and the Transvaal, thus leaving the country even more sparsely populated. Crown land could be bought for four shillings an acre; labour, if unskilled, was plentiful and cheap, and most important in Africa, water was plentiful.

The Duke of Buccleuch bought 1 000 acres of land in Natal in the vicinity of the upper Illovo river, naming it 'Beaulieu-on-the-Illovo'. He financed and made himself responsible for the emigration of more than 40 of his hard-hit tenants, providing them with farm implements, seed, provisions, stoves and tents. In his account book for 1850 is a fully audited record of the 'Emigration Expenses'.

On February 25, 1850, the little band of emigrants who, in later years, were referred to as 'they old Port Nataliers', by their relatives and friends in England, took their final farewell and, waving gaily, embarked on the barge *John Samuel* at Buckler's Hard. But as they sailed down the Beaulieu river to join the *Lady Bruce* (350 tons), lying in the Solent, the Master of the *John Samuel* put his barge aground on the mud on the Exbury shore — rather an anticlimax at the beginning of their great adventure! From this apparent evil omen there were no ill-effects for they arrived safely in the *Lady Bruce* off Durban Bay in June 1850.

After a voyage of what must have been four months of sheer misery, the settlers had to scramble from rope ladders down the side of the ship, or jump into surf boats or be carried on the backs of natives before they could set foot on the land of their adoption. Once ashore, they had to pitch camp, for in those early days Durban consisted of a few wattle and daub dwellings. While the wives and children managed as best they could in their camp on the beaches, their men, anxious to see the land on which they were to settle, set off for the interior, often on foot, struggling through tall grass, thick bush and under a burning sun, in search of their land. Having staked their claim they returned to Durban, hired ox-wagons and trekked with their families and belongings to start their new homes.

Thus it was that 'The Duke's People', as they became known in Natal, came to settle at Beaulieu-on-the-Illovo. But as time went on, they found this name too cumbersome and too confusing with the Beaulieu they had left behind. At a meeting in 1853, they drew up a petition requesting their benefactor to change the name. It so happened that the Duke of Buccleuch received their petition while he was staying at his favourite residence, Buccleuch House, at Richmond, Surrey, and so Richmond it became!

On the whole, despite great hardship, the 'Duke's People' were fairly satisfied with their lot. Their land lay in a fertile basin surrounded by soft rolling hills with good soil and pasturage and a regular rainfall. Perhaps the land of their adoption was not so unlike the country they had left behind them.

From the lovely indigenous forests, yellow-wood trees provided the timber for homesteads and furniture. Game abounded in the colony — lion, leopard, buffalo, elephant and many species of antelope. Cattle could be bought from the natives for 30 shillings a head and fowls were three pence each.

A Cambridge undergraduate described Richmond in 1855 thus:

I had been walking two good hours when I suddenly found myself in a newly laid-out town, beautifully situated on a gentle slope in the elbow of a range of bold, grass-covered hills. At the time, however, it could boast of only a single house, which by the way, was a good stone one, and a house of accommodation. Altogether there were upwards of 50 substantial Caffre huts inhabited by emigrants, each standing in an enclosed and freshly dug garden.

By 1856 a pretty village of small homesteads, built of locally quarried stone and neatly thatched, had emerged. Mindful of his people's spiritual welfare, the Duke of Buccleuch had given the Rev. James Green, Dean of Natal, the sum of £100 with which to build a church. The settlers, feeling the need of a substantial church, not only as a place of worship but as a refuge in time of trouble, pulled down the large hut which they had used for worship and built a small stone church with a tiled roof. The Anglican church was consecrated by the Bishop of Natal, J. W. Colenso, and named St. Mary's. It was the first to be consecrated in Natal.

By this time (1856) the village could boast of a shop, a smithy, a water-mill and a post office. Mails were dispatched from Pietermaritzburg to Richmond by means of native runners until 1872 when a post-cart service was started which carried passengers and mail.

Archdeacon Fearn and his wife taught the village children in a tiny



Walter Francis, 5th Duke of Buccleuch, 7th Duke of Queensbury. 1806-1884. Founded the colony of Beaulieu (now Richmond), Port Natal, South Africa.



St. Mary's Church, Richmond — the first church to be consecrated in Natal.



An early Settler's cottage in the village of Richmond. Present owner has unfortunately white-washed the quarried stone walls.



The early school in Richmond.

school-room. They were later to found the first Diocesan College for Girls in Natal, at Richmond, and two of the writer's great-aunts were among the first school boarders.

The settlers found a market in Pietermaritzburg for their potatoes, green vegetables and dairy produce. In fine weather, wagons might take one-and-a-half days to travel the 26 miles to the capital, and four days to reach Durban. In wet weather, when the roads became a quagmire, it was a different story.

More than the earlier Dutch settlers, the English settlers had much to learn. In the Richmond district various crops were tried — tobacco, coffee, wheat, indigo and flax with no success. Cecil Rhodes and his brother tried to grow cotton in the Umkomaas valley.

In the end, maize was found to be the most suitable crop. Cattle and sheep flourished and wattle was introduced in 1864. No great fortunes were amassed but most of the settlers prospered.

Among the settlers from Buckler's Hard were William Payne, and John, Joseph and George Crouch. These names are still to be found at Buckler's Hard.

Two of the early settlers from the Duke's estate were John and William Nicholson. John called his farm 'Illovo-Mills' and built the first water-mill for corn grinding. William was allotted the farm 'Beaulieu' which today is owned by his descendant, Mr. Ravenor Nicholson. It is one of the show farms of Natal. Lord Montague, present owner of Beaulieu Estate, visited the farm when he was in South Africa in 1959. He takes a lively interest in his forebear's settlement.

Other early settlers were Samuel Strapp, who opened an inn, and the Dacomb brothers, who opened the first shop. C. Dacomb was later appointed the first Postmaster. Antony Pigg, the wheelwright, became a lay preacher and taught in the Sunday School, while John Bazley built a mill and dug a watercourse.

Today, settlers from Kenya, India, Ceylon and other parts of the once farflung empire, have found their way to Richmond. The excellence of the agricultural land and the healthy climate have attracted many farmers to the district. Tea plantations and citrus orchards flourish, besides maize, cattle and sheep, while acres of forestry cover the hills. Motor-cars and good roads have cut down the distance between Pietermaritzburg and Richmond to a mere half-hour journey.

Yet the little town still retains the appearance and flavour of a peaceful English village. It remains a charming memorial to those adventurous and industrious English pioneers who, 125 years ago, forsook their homeland and ventured to an unknown land on the other side of the globe.

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